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AUTHOR Ackerman, Richard; Maslin-Ostrowski, Patricia
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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a study that examined case-study teaching methods, specifically, the use of case stories in the training of educational administrators. A case story blends aspects of the case-study methods with storytelling. The case-story approach asks students to develop case stories, using their personal experience to create authentic educational administration scenarios. The case studies help students share personal leadership practices and dilemmas and promote understanding. A survey was administered at the midpoint and end of the semester to 60 graduate students in educational administration at 3 sites. Interviews were also conducted with professors and students. Respondents said that case stories contribute authenticity to the classroom, foster involvement, bridge the gap between theory and practice, and illuminate discourse. A conclusion is that the case-study and case-story methods are not mutually exclusive but complementary teaching techniques. Together, the approaches encourage skill development and reflection on practice. Whether using the more objective case study or the more personal case story, each method creates a realistic, engaging learning situation. A sample of the questionnaire is included. (Contains 21 references.) (LMI)

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Developing *Case Stories*: An Analysis of the Case Method of Instruction and Storytelling in Teaching Educational Administration

Richard Ackerman, University of Massachusetts Lowell,
College of Education

Patricia Maslin-Ostrowski, Florida Atlantic University,
College of Education

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Developing *Case Stories*:
An Analysis of the Case Method of Instruction and Storytelling in Teaching Educational Administration

Oh, gentle readers, you would find a tale in everything.
-W. Wordsworth

As administrator educators and researchers, our work has centered on how aspiring school leaders may better understand and share their personal leadership practices and dilemmas. Our study was designed to examine traditional case study teaching methods along with an approach that we call a *case story* when used as companion teaching tools in working with future school leaders. The purpose of the study was to increase our understanding of the efficacy of these instructional techniques from the perspectives of student and teacher.

A *case story* blends aspects of the case study method (Christensen & Hansen, 1987) with the tradition, artistry and imagination of story (Campbell, 1968 & 1988; Estes, 1992; Whyte, 1994) and story telling (Christensen, Garvin, & Sweet, 1991; Collins, 1992; Egan, 1986; Mellon, 1992; Moore, 1991). A *case story* is both a written and oral description of a real life, "close-to-the bone" leadership situation, written with words meant to come fully to life when discussed.

A considerable literature has focused on case method teaching in the professions of business, law, medicine and public policy. There is also now a substantial case method literature in the fields of teacher and administrator education (Merseth, K., 1981). And, the past five years have seen emerging research and theorizing based on the place of narrative or story in teaching and teacher education (Carter, 1993; Wassermann, 1993 & 1994; Witherell & Noddings, 1991). The theoretical and practical framework for our research is based in part on the work of C. Roland Christensen of the Harvard Business School who has stressed that the key to the case method is the discussion itself (Christensen, et. al., 1991). Consequently, we have also turned to the work of Joseph Campbell (1988), Clarissa Pinkol Estes (1992) and David Whyte (1994) along with a rich literature in the art of story telling (Collins, 1992; Egan, 1986; Mellon, 1992; Moore, 1991).

Many argue that professional and leadership competence does not develop through cognitive learning experiences prior to practice. Instead, the habits and beliefs that most influence practice develop during the initial years of practice itself. Our efforts have aimed to explore practical tools which would serve school leaders during their pre-entry and entry stage into the profession. By increasing our repertoire of teaching techniques with storytelling and *case stories*, we hope to offer teachers of educational administration another tool to enhance the skill development and reflective practice of school leaders.

Method of Inquiry

In this exploratory study we examined an emerging method which we call the *case story* when used along with the traditional case study method as teaching tools in the training of educational administrators. Given that there is a great deal already written about the case study method of management instruction, this study was designed to provide an introduction to the *case story* approach as implemented by two professors in three graduate level classrooms.

The sample consisted of 60 degree seeking students, both masters and doctoral candidates, enrolled in graduate programs for educational administration. An overwhelming majority of participants were currently practicing in the field of education, serving as administrative interns and/or had previous experience working in schools. For some students this was their first exposure to cases, while others were already acquainted with the case study method. Students were dispersed across three sites, including one private and two public universities.

We invited each student to evaluate the use of case studies and *case stories* over the course of one semester by anonymously completing a simple questionnaire that asked open-ended questions about their experiences and reactions (see Appendix). Questionnaires were distributed at the middle and end of the semester. To solicit additional student feedback about the two methods, we held class discussions following the use of the *case story*, at the midpoint of the semester and at the end of the semester. These discussions were taped and the professors took detailed notes.

The professors were interviewed at the middle and end of the semester. Using open-ended questions they were asked to describe how they applied the methods and to assess the techniques from their perspectives.

Toward the end of the semester we conducted interviews with two students from each class in order to confirm as well as disconfirm our observations and initial interpretations. Given that we have merged the roles of researcher and participant (i.e., professor), it was important to distinguish the voices of student and teacher. Students were encouraged to comment on our interpretations, adding histories, their own meanings and critiques. In so doing, we began to document the role which *case stories* play in articulating graduate students' understandings of their practices and the complexities of administrative life.

All questionnaires were analyzed and coded looking for patterns and inconsistencies across respondents. When we analyzed the data by institution, across institutions and by degree levels, we found little or no difference according to these variables. Thus we chose to look at the sample as one group and aggregated the data. In a future study that draws a

larger sample, different perspectives might be revealed, e.g. based on degree sought.

This study provides a close view of how two professors are using the *case story* approach to teach educational leadership. Caution must be exercised when trying to generalize the findings and conclusions from this study. It is hoped, however, that some of the ideas and issues raised, as well as information about the method, will be useful to teachers in educational administration.

Developing *Case Stories* in Educational Leadership

In order to provide a unique way for students to understand and share personal leadership practices and dilemmas, we asked them to blend aspects of the case study method with the tradition, artistry and imagination of storywriting and storytelling--they developed *case stories*. The professors involved in this study were consistent in how they presented the concepts and utilized the *case story* teaching strategy with their students. This process is described below.

Before introducing the *case story* method students were first exposed to the classic case study method following the Harvard Business School format (see Barnes, Christensen, & Hansen, 1994; Christensen, Garvin, & Sweet, 1991; Shapiro, 1975). By reading and analyzing cases in class, they were able to consider situations about real people and real problems in order to test theories and beliefs. The case studies offered students an opportunity to reflect on practice, to develop plans of action, and to think about and analyze leadership in schools. Building on this positive experience, we asked students during another class meeting to use their personal experiences to create *case stories* as a way to access their own leadership. The *case story* model was presented in six steps.

Step 1: *The Freewrite.* The freewrite activity is designed to warm students to the process of writing, communicating their ideas to others, and engaging in the issues of their own leadership. Before actually writing, we showed students an example of a *case story* which demonstrated the power and potential of a single paragraph. Next, we asked them to do a seven minute freewrite using a stem to get started, e.g. "The obstacle to leadership for me is..." Students were encouraged simply to get their thoughts on paper, to let their ideas flow, and not worry about form. Once the freewrite ended, the class was divided into groups of three where each student read his story out loud and then highlighted the gems, i.e. those aspects of the story that were particularly meaningful. Each participant had five minutes to speak. The others were instructed to listen and not interrupt.

Step 2: *Writing Case Stories.* With support and guidance from colleagues and the instructor, students were given 45 minutes to write a one page *case story* that described a real

life, "close-to-the-bone" leadership situation. We urged them to think about a discrete event or critical incident which presented a dilemma or crucial decision that had to be made. Students were advised to write about an actual event that had enough intriguing decision points and provocative undercurrents to make a group of people want to think and talk about them.

We also recommended that students choose something that mattered to them yet was limited in scope. We suggested that they capture the context, provide the facts, develop the personality of the lead character, and use dialogue. Finally, we asked them to give their *case story* a title.

Step 3: *Telling & Listening to Case Stories.* Once again we divided the class into triads (different groups from the last time) for a 45 minute debriefing session. Three group roles, which rotated every fifteen minutes, were assigned as follows: one member owned the *case story*; one member was facilitator of the process; and one member was timekeeper. The process required each student to read her own *case story* aloud while the others listened carefully without interrupting. The writer would then "tell" the story in her own words. She elaborated on the text and attempted to identify the essence of her story, i.e. what she believed was the heart of the *case story*. Next the participants could ask *only* clarifying questions. When those questions were exhausted they could engage in a dialogue and begin to frame the problem and interpret the *case story*.

Step 4: *Small Group Reflection on Case Story Process.* In small groups of six, we suggested that students examine their experience writing, telling and analyzing *case stories*. We posed three questions for them to consider:

1. What was it like listening to and discussing your colleagues' *case stories*?
2. What was it like writing, telling and hearing discussions of your own *case story*?
3. Do you have any other observations and reactions to the work that you just completed?

Step 5: *Whole Group Reflection on Case Story Process.* Each group reported to the class one of the major topics or important findings that they had explored. During this time everyone had a chance to comment and react to the experience, building on the ideas of each other.

Step 6: *Conclusion.* We concluded the class by talking about the importance of improving professional practice and how it is essential first to understand our practice if we are to strengthen it. We also discussed how difficult it is to understand practice while immersed in it. Finally, we emphasized how allowing the time and distance to reflect on practice, will help leaders to make sense out of it.

Findings & Discussion

Students involved in the educational leadership classes consistently found both the case study and *case story* methods to be valuable learning experiences. Participants reinforced the merit of using case studies and our findings in this area support the extensive literature on the case study method. Thus we will focus our discussion on findings that address the *case story* and show how the two approaches are perceived to be similar and different.

Similarities Between Two Methods

Close-to-the-Bone Education. Students appreciated the authenticity of cases whether they were studies or stories. They liked talking about "real people in real life situations rather than pretending" and found this to be "relevant," and close-to-the-bone. Students commented, "This is elevated curriculum;" "With cases and stories you learn from the field;" "It complements the text;" and,

> Often emotion, crises and dialogue that typifies the real world of education are presented. Much reality is brought to the table for discussion and review.
>
> The case study/story works for me because it personalizes topics and issues. I often feel eager to give my opinion since I can identify with most of the cases.
>
> The cases presented an opportunity to apply the readings and personal experiences in a real life situation.

Active Learning: Putting Yourself There. Students identified *case stories* and studies as engaging learning techniques. In order to understand and analyze the case issues, students became actively involved in discussions. Students also participated in debates and role plays during case study instruction, something that could be tried with *case stories.* Typically, they remarked that, "It gets your attention, you are involved." One student's statement summed up the feeling of many: "With stories and cases you can put yourself there and get the experience."

Students were encouraged to think critically about problems of practice. They had to consider why and how the problem evolved, as well as what steps should be taken next. Participants reported that they enjoyed the challenge of confronting a genuine dilemma without knowing how it had been resolved. According to a class member,

> The open-endedness of each one allows for creative ideas to follow as well as diagnosing personalities and situations that lead to the problem. The uniqueness of

each one makes them interesting and relative at times to what you're doing.

Cases Bridge Theory & Practice. In keeping with the case study literature, students found that both types of cases helped to bridge theory and practice. Typical comments were:

> They help me to bring a greater understanding to the concepts, issues and theories discussed...concretizing what I'm learning in this course.
>
> *Case stories* and studies create the educational context and set the stage for theoretical applications.
>
> The approach in reviewing cases in this class was open forum-reaction method and inquiry-related-to-practice method. Asking what-if questions and reconciling the events of the case with what we perceive to be "good practice" were common frameworks for discussion as well.

Diverse Perspectives Illuminated. Another benefit that students found across the two methods was the opportunity to see multiple perspectives in a situation. In the words of students,

> After having the situation down in print and rereading it with aliases, I was able to step outside the study and view it differently. I think I would have probably reacted the same way but I was able to see others' points of views somewhat differently.
>
> This stuff makes you think. It makes you look at different ways to approach problems.
>
> I have learned to listen to others and have come to realize that people truly look at similar issues in a much different fashion. It helps to portray the real world that most of us encounter in schools.

Students expressed an interest in seeing the two approaches used again in their educational leadership classes.

Key Differences Between Two Methods

Although the two methods have some common denominators, they vary in a number of ways. A critical difference is that the *case story* captures one person's perspective and the reader/listener only gets the writer's point of view. Some students labeled the *case story* subjective and the case study objective. According to many students, a distinguishing feature of the *case story* is that it shows greater emotion, drama and feeling. Some participants noted that the author of a case study must do research to gather background information while the *case story* is written "from within."

Another unique quality of the *case story* is that it reveals a single image or a germ of an image. In contrast to case studies, the *case story* does not include a lot of information about the cast of characters nor does it provide as much detail or evidence. It also tends to be shorter in length. The simplicity of the *case story* explains its elegance whereas story as case builds in more decision points and the elegance is found in its complexity.

Case stories are a generative, evolving medium unlike case studies which are finite or frozen in time. While writing and talking about stories, the stories change. They become works in progress. Just as the cornerstone of the case study method is the discussion, the storytelling and conversation is pivotal to learning with the *case story*. A difference, however, is that something special happens in the telling of the story. Boundaries are dissolved, ideas come alive and the storyteller adds to the written piece, something that does not happen with a case study.

Critique of *Case Story* Method

Getting Started & When to Stop. Some students easily began writing, for example one student commented, "Writing my case was not difficult because I have lived with it intimately for an extended period." Yet for numerous students, getting started writing the *case story* was difficult. They typically characterized the struggle this way: "At the beginning I couldn't think of anything but after awhile various possible stories came to mind."

Another challenge was reducing a situation to a single page of text. The class was asked to keep their writing raw and simple. The idea was to create the bare outline of a story. If the story was too long it might turn into a case study and infringe on the storyteller's opportunity to ruminate and expand on the original writing. A student commented, "I was limited to one page to illustrate an entire novel's worth of a problem;" while another said,

> The *case story* gave me the opportunity to put into words a leadership problem that is of real concern to me. As predicted, once I started it was difficult to stop. I originally completed 8-9 pages and then had to do a good job of editing. The *case story* provided me with an opportunity for reflection.

Quite a few students were compelled to go over the arbitrary one page limit that had been set by the instructors.

Writers Present Their Own Perspective. As we mentioned previously, *case stories* are written from within, they are about one practitioner's experience. Thus *case stories* are often written in the first person while some authors choose to tell

their story in the third person using a pseudonym. A concern expressed by some students regarding this writing style was that it produced single interpretation *case stories*. "I like to hear all sides of an argument before I form an opinion," commented one student. Yet this person also pointed out that the chance to question the writer and storyteller about the situation was an interesting way to hear more about the other viewpoints--something that you cannot do with a case study. Nonetheless, the individual perspective of *case stories* may be both a strength and weakness of the method. It is a weakness because it makes it difficult to generalize from *case stories*. It is a strength because it captures the richness and reality of a practitioner's experience while simultaneously demonstrating the complexities and ambiguities of life in schools.

Story Writing as Thinking. Students recognized that the writing process forced them to think about and make sense of their own practice retrospectively. After sifting through their memory banks they identified a dilemma or problem that mattered to them personally, and then wrote the story. The story writing required them to describe what happened, select the major events and connect them in some way. Over and over again students commented, "The writing is reflective;" "It was difficult, yet rewarding." They made statements like:

> The exercise was illuminating by helping me to frame the central issue. I got a strong sense of the dynamics or forces that created the problem. Also, when writing my case I was able to develop a more reflective style that allowed me to look more carefully at what happened and what could have happened.
>
> Writing my own case helped me to develop skills at discerning central issues and how to avoid digressing when working on a sensitive issue or problem. Writing about a case that I was personally involved in enabled me to put it into a more constructive perspective for the future.
>
> It was helpful to think how I dealt with it at the time and how I'd deal with it now.
>
> Writing the case was a difficult process for me. I needed to play the roles of observer and recorder rather than participant. Although it was difficult, it was a positive reflective process which gave me an opportunity to learn different ways of resolution.

The writing process demonstrated how difficult it can be for a practitioner to remove him or herself from a situation and look at it objectively. For example, some students said that they were uneasy writing about personal experiences. According to one student, "The *case story* was difficult for me. I was probably too close to the individuals involved." Yet students generally reported that the personal nature of the *case story* made it easy

to identify with the dilemmas presented. The fact that a peer owned the case motivated them to become invested in figuring out the meaning of the story.

Oral Tradition Enhances Learning. The storytelling, listening and dialogue activity is a crucial step in this learning model. In our classes it fostered great communication among students and inspired them to press hard to make sense of each other's stories. It may even be that "the most important part is the dialoguing that accompanies these cases," as one student indicated. Clearly student centered learning, this experience was characterized by another student this way:

> Education is sharing. This format elicits feedback that says we're all colleagues. This wouldn't work if the teacher was dictating. We can learn from each other.

The relationship between storytellers and listeners was generally positive for students and based on student reports, led to greater understanding of the issues. Participants commented on the "quality of feedback," and the support given by group members. This interaction was described by some as,

> It's interesting and helpful hearing others' reactions to your story and hearing their stories.
>
> Splendid. Storytelling is valuable.
>
> We're each other's best teachers...I appreciated the attention and caring that my group showed for me and my issue...and the insights that they provided.

It was during this activity that multiple perspectives and different meanings to each story were raised.

Case Story Invites Reflection & Reflection Invites Case Story. The storytelling, listening and dialogue step encouraged students to continue the reflective process that began with writing. Stories evolved in the telling and seemed to invite individuals to deliberate further on their stories. As colleagues seriously considered each story, storytellers remembered more and embellished their stories. Students seemed pleased about what they were learning during these conversations and made comments such as,

> It allowed me to become a better reflective thinker. It has allowed me to see the big picture and to look at various perspectives in a situation.
>
> I was forced to listen carefully when my colleagues were telling their stories...Sometimes we are too quick to give answers.
>
> In some [cases] I felt inadequate. "Why didn't I see

> that relationship?" But that's okay. It made me look at situations closer...Often people's views are different but connected.
>
> It has helped me practice coming up with practical and useful solutions or actions to take. This seems to be an effective instructional tool.

Some students chose to take their *case stories* home to refine them further. Some even edited their *case stories* and took them to school to discuss with teachers and administrators thereby extending the reflection process with other involved practitioners. A student commented,

> The experience has worked. It has allowed me to share my insights and experiences not just in class but at school with my colleagues.

Many students acknowledged that without the class structure they would not have found the time to write about their own problems of practice. They appreciated using class time to do so as indicated by this student's remarks,

> I especially enjoyed the class time to write a *case story*. This was the first time I was able to write reflectively on an issue that was close to me.

Students lamented that the demands of their jobs prevent them from sitting down to write and think about their work as much as they would like--or should.

Importance of Structure. The six steps of the *case story* model seemed to work well with the different classes. The freewrite step warmed students up to the process. Requiring everyone to move immediately into writing *case stories* kept people on task. As we have discussed, the telling and listening stage was crucial to the success of this learning activity. Regarding the remaining steps, students appreciated the chance to reflect on the experience in small groups and then collectively. This helped both students and teachers to synthesize and evaluate the *case story* approach.

Although this issue was raised by a minority of students, it is necessary to note a need for the instructor to establish groundrules regarding the debriefing step. In addition to establishing procedures, the importance of using good listening skills and exhibiting values of caring should be stressed. A student aptly wrote,

> I feel that sharing the stories should be proceeded with behavior rules. Even though we are all adults, some can still respond to a personal *case story* without thinking first about what they are saying. It stings.

Despite this and other concerns that have been mentioned, the

universal response to the *case story* method was, "I'd like to see more of it." In fact, one university was so pleased with the feedback that a new course in developing *case stories* will soon be offered.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The case study and *case story* methods are not mutually exclusive but rather were found to be complementary teaching techniques that enhance the training of school administrators. Together, these approaches encourage skill development and reflection on practice. The findings of this study suggest that both methods are beneficial and should be considered in leadership programs.

Case stories share many of the positive characteristics of case studies. For example, each offers an excellent way for aspiring educational leaders to integrate theory and practice. Whether using the more objective case study or the more personal *case story*, each provides a positive alternative to the conventional lecture format by creating a realistic, engaging learning situation in the classroom. We see no competition between the two approaches.

Case stories expand the repertoire of teaching strategies available to professors of educational administration. They offer a new dimension of reflection that invites students to consider more deeply the meaning of their action. *Case stories* help students to become more involved in their own and others' learning by developing problem-solving and analytical skills, thus enabling them to think more critically and systematically about their own values and purposes. Through the different steps of the *case story* method, students are inspired to consider carefully the evolving knowledge base that guides their practice.

The classroom can be a safe environment and provide the needed structure for students to write and tell *case stories*. On the other hand, for some students this is a risky undertaking and the class setting may not feel so safe. Hopefully, with proper guidance and support from instructors, students will eventually recognize that the experience is worth the risk. It is essential that the right conditions be created in the classroom if students are to tell their stories publically. This learning activity will not likely be successful if students do not trust that their ideas will be respected and that the information discussed will be treated confidentially.

All students and practitioners of educational administration have stories to tell. The *case story* method structures the conditions for good stories to be developed--and may deter the use of "war stories" in class. It is important that students are clear about what kinds of stories are appropriate and expected.

Teaching *case stories* can be done alone or as a team. The technique can easily be learned and adapted to the needs of a

particular group of students. We recommend that educational leadership professors experiment with this method in their classes. Teachers may even choose to become part of the process and tell stories thereby revealing themselves and changing the culture of the classroom. Our experience was rewarding and we learned right along with the students.

In reconciling case method and *case story* as they apply to the experiences of our graduate students, we have tried not to see them as mutually exclusive methods despite an admitted bias reflected in this paper toward the latter. We regard them both as complementary and distinctive perspectives on fundamental processes of learning and growth for developing administrators. We believe that formulating a case as story or story as case is valuable neither as a means to an end nor as an end in itself, because both may be helpful in determining ends.

Underlying our paper is a premise that both methods represent a powerful way for future administrators to understand how their worlds work. The point of case study and *case story* is to help practitioners understand their own theories of practice as a natural evolving process of creating knowledge rather than an end in itself. Their stories tell not just what happens to them, but their conscious understanding of and response to what happens. Publically sharing their stories supports further refinement and depth of understanding. Perhaps our most significant finding with regard to these methods is that as the locus of our students' concerns moves inward, an inquiring ambivalent consciousness emerges in their writing and telling. A different perspective on their own leadership appears, more skeptical and less idealistic on the surface, but just as resonant with meaning.

Research must continually be alert to the processes that practitioners engage in around the knowledge bases that they possess (Anderson & Page, in press) even though these are most difficult to portray. While our conclusions are still in the formative stages, our aim is to continue to explore and understand case studies and *case stories* as useful companion tools for teachers of educational administration.

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Appendix

CRITIQUE OF CASE METHOD & CASE STORY APPROACH TO TEACHING EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

1. In your own words, please define the two methods we have used in this class: the case study & the *case story*.

2. In your own words, please tell me what your experience has been like when we use the case study method in class. Did it work for you--why?

3. In your own words, please tell me what your experience was like when we used the *case story* approach in class. Did it work for you--why?